At Exactly What Point Did I Lose Control Of This Flirting?

By: Suzume CA

A vignette from the 'pages' of Hand Me Downs: What happens when our fifth-year Etoile turns her hypnotic eyes on the student council president of St. Lulim? Certainly not what she expects… Originally a one-shot written on what was more or less a dare, but it sort of grew legs. Later chapters concurrent with the events of Yamiberry.

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Kiss Me?

DISCLAIMER THE FIRST: I do not own Strawberry Panic. And so on.

DISCLAIMER THE SECOND: This just sort of… happened today. I'll get back to *Hand Me Downs* in short order, but when Ninemil asked me in a review to tell more about Shizuma's attempt to flirt with Chikaru, well… it was hard to resist.

DISCLAIMER THE THIRD: This was originally a one-shot. Oops.

At Exactly What Point Did I Lose Control Of This Flirting?

By Suzume CA

Part 1: Kiss Me?

Hanazono Shizuma watched from a distance as Lulim's youngest student council president in twenty years or more walked down the hall with her favorite first-year troublemakers, chatting happily with them over heaven only knew what.

How was it that sweet little Minamoto Chikaru, the wide-eyed baby sister, had become such a beloved figure in so short a space? Certainly her election to council president had been aided by the reputation of her sister, but this fourth-year marvel had since earned the respect and devotion of her entire school, seniors and underclassmen alike.

Shizuma found herself envying that: as Etoile, she was no stranger to respect and even awe, particularly from the younger students, but Chikaru had somehow found a way to be everyone's friend and

sister even in light of her vaunted position. Where Shizuma was detached and aloof, sometimes of her own choice but more often not, Chikaru was held firmly in the hearts of all St. Lulim.

Moreover, Shizuma envied her obvious sense of peace and contentedness, with just the barest hint of mischief, and wondered if she would ever find herself in such a place again. Both of them had endured crushing losses the year before -- Shizuma of her lover and fellow Etoile Kaori and Chikaru of her dear sister Naoko -- but somehow Chikaru, after a short period of being seemingly lost within herself, had emerged from her pain and blossomed, where Shizuma feared that the cold in her heart would never truly leave her.

Perhaps it was time to find out the secrets of the so-called Shadow Empress of Astraea. And Shizuma knew just how to do it.

"Council President Minamoto-san," she called, stepping purposefully toward the trio of Lulim girls, intercepting them in their path down the hallway.

"Etoile-sama," Chikaru bowed. The first-years with her (whose names Shizuma found, to her chagrin, that she could not remember) bowed as well, their eyes bugging just slightly before they looked down. Same old reverence.

"Do you have a moment to meet me in the council chambers, Minamoto-san?"

"Of course, Etoile-sama. I am at your service."

Shizuma smiled to herself as the first-years bid their onee-sama farewell and scampered off. Chikaru then followed Shizuma to the empty council chamber, where the Etoile waved her inside before closing the door behind them. When she looked around, she saw Chikaru standing near her customary seat at the table, as if out of habit.

"So what can I do for you so close to the end of term, Etoile-sama?"

"Chikaru-chan, please, you know you can call me by my name," the Etoile smiled, stepping slowly closer to the dark-haired girl. "I know we haven't been as close since… last year, but I'm still the same Shizuma."

"Mmm, yes, I suppose you are, but here within the council chambers, I imagine I should show your rank the respect it is due, Etoile-sama."

"Perhaps," Shizuma conceded, stepping purposefully into Chikaru's personal space, the young president edging back bemusedly until her back was against her chair. "But I didn't ask you here on council business."

"I see," Chikaru nodded. "Then what *is* your business with me?"

Shizuma leaned in and narrowed her eyes at Chikaru, giving her that look that had melted the hearts of many over these past lonely months. "You're an enigma, Chikaru," she whispered. "And when I see an enigma, I want to… *solve* it."

"Etoile-sama," Chikaru said, with just a hint of soft surprise in her voice, "what are your intentions?"

"I think," Shizuma breathed, leaning still closer, "that I want to kiss you now, Chikaru-chan."

"Really, now?"

"Mmm hmm."

"A kiss from the Etoile," Chikaru whispered. "A dream of so many."

"A kiss doesn't have to be a dream," Shizuma said in a playful growl, pulling Chikaru to her, feeling a thrilling spark at the ease with which their bodies fit together.

"A kiss," Chikaru repeated, her eyes briefly widening as she stared up into Shizuma's own. "I imagine you weren't thinking of a chaste

little peck, Etoile-sama?"

"Certainly not, council president Minamoto-san," Shizuma grinned, returning the formality.

"Ahh," Chikaru nodded, as though only now understanding. When next she spoke, her voice had taken on a deliciously husky quality. "A kiss of fire and electricity, and the heat of all-consuming desire? A kiss of purest passion that feels like needles under your skin, where your mind is flooded with the wonderful agony of those millions of tiny pinpricks of sensation? A kiss that sends your soul reeling, and makes you wonder how much more you can possibly endure, where your tortured mind is begging you to stop even as your body hungrily demands more?"

Shizuma stared unblinking into Chikaru's eyes, her heart racing more than ever, and to her shock, she found that now *she* was edging further and further back, until *she* was the one with her back to the wall while the younger girl pressed ever closer.

"A kiss that makes you wonder 'Dear God, could this woman be some incarnation of all the Muses and goddesses of love that ever inspired the poets and dreamers of a thousand ages gone?' A kiss of such transcendent joy that it seems to exist outside of time and space, in a tiny white-hot world that contains only you, and her, and the palpable presence of your shared pleasure?"

Her breath had been coming in short gasps, but Shizuma inhaled sharply as Chikaru pressed still closer, their bodies sliding just slightly against one another.

"A kiss that leaves you dizzy and light-headed, with your heart pounding so hard that you think it might explode from your breast, with all the blood seeming to pool in a much, much warmer place further beneath? A kiss that buckles your knees such that you can scarcely stand? A kiss that leaves your skin flushed and damp, your eyes wide with wonder, your lips excruciatingly aflame as you ponder

how to quench this desire that you've unleashed from a deep, deep place inside yourself?"

"Yes," Shizuma tried to say, but she had no voice, so she simply nodded.

Chikaru's lips stopped within a fraction of an inch of Shizuma's, and when her voice came, it was barely audible, just the traces of a seductive whisper. "I'm sure you *were* thinking of this, Etoile-sama. However, I need to go to class, so sometimes a kiss must remain a dream."

And just like that, she was gone, leaving Shizuma standing there unsteadily, shocked that the moment had ended so abruptly.

Mind spinning with questions, most particularly of where sweet little Chikaru could have learned all that, Shizuma fanned herself with one hand. "Why is it always the quiet ones?" she muttered to herself, pondering the merits of a brisk, cool shower before her next appointment.

Next: Come to Bed With Me?

Come to Bed With Me?

AUTHOR'S NOTE: So hey, did you ever whimsically write a one-shot and then months later decide that there was actually more to say? Yeah, me neither. Well, until now, anyway.

Part 2: Come to Bed With Me?

The final Student Council meeting of term ended as so many of the previous ones had: with Shizuma scarcely noticing, and frankly caring even less. In the end, it took a nudge from Miyuki to bring her out of her reverie long enough to give the closing words.

"Thank you one and all for your hard work as another academic year draws to a close," she said, more or less automatically. "Your dedication to your schools is commendable, and I'm sure next year will more than ever bring us together for the common good of all Astraea."

"Thank you, Etoile-sama," Miyuki nodded. "This meeting is adjourned."

Amidst the sounds of scooting chairs and rustling papers, Shizuma rose quickly and made her way to the exit, followed closely by Miyuki. No doubt her old friend would once again gently scold her for her inattention once they were clear of other ears, but Shizuma was really in no mood to hear it.

To her surprise, though, it was another voice that drew her attention as she attempted to make her escape. "Etoile-sama, a moment please?"

Shizuma and Miyuki turned to see Chikaru hurrying down the hall after them. The Lulim president smiled as she pulled up before them

and gave a small bow. "I was hoping to catch you before you left, Etoile-sama. May I bother you for a moment?"

"Of course, Minamoto-san," Shizuma nodded in reply. She had not spoken to Chikaru, or indeed even made eye contact with her, since their other recent encounter in the council chambers. Surely this couldn't be about *that*, though, could it?

Seemingly oblivious to Miyuki's presence, Chikaru took a step closer, so that she was just inside Shizuma's personal space. "I've been thinking a lot about that near-miss we had last week," she said in a soft voice, her eyes twinkling.

"Have you, now?" Shizuma asked, somewhat shocked to feel the very beginnings of a blush rising to her cheeks.

"Very much so. And so I was wondering, Etoile-sama, if I might convince you to come to bed with me this evening?"

Once again, Shizuma found herself in the rare and awkward position of being completely speechless. Had she actually just heard that? Was Chikaru *propositioning* her? In front of *Miyuki*, no less? She glanced to her left to see Miyuki's reaction, but to her deepening shock, her old friend was actually *smirking* at her.

"Um," she choked out.

"You don't have to decide now," Chikaru went on, laying one hand on the Etoile's arm. "If you want to, though, come to my room at eight o'clock. I'd love to see you."

With a last bow and a bright smile toward Miyuki, Chikaru turned and left them, heading toward the Lulim wing of the dormitory.

"Um," Shizuma said again, turning shocked eyes to Miyuki. "Did she just..?"

"Are you going to take her up on her offer?" Miyuki asked, poorly attempting to hide her obvious amusement behind an innocent expression.

"What kind of question is that?" Shizuma whispered.

"An honest one. If you want my opinion, I think you should go."

" *Miyuki!"*

"Aha," Miyuki nodded, as though in understanding. "You've never been to bed with Chikaru before, then?"

"Of… of *course* I haven't!"

"Well, I won't spoil it for you, then," Miyuki grinned. She then leaned in very close and all but whispered the rest into Shizuma's ear. "Except to say that she's *wonderful* ."

That said, Miyuki departed as well, leaving a stunned Shizuma to attempt to process everything she'd just heard.

That evening, at a quarter to eight, Shizuma found herself in front of the full-length dressing mirror in her room, eyeing her reflection critically, not to say nervously. She turned one way and another, trying to see herself from all angles. With a sigh, she realized that this negligee was all wrong, though: as much as she liked it, she was still going to have to make her way to Chikaru's room in uniform, and the gauzy fabric would get crushed and wrinkled even over so short a distance. Sighing loudly, she threw the garment into a growing pile of discarded pieces of lingerie, each of them judged to be all wrong for the evening.

What would Chikaru want to see her in, anyway?

With a self-deprecating sigh, Shizuma realized that this was her problem: she had allowed this situation to run away from her

completely. How in the world had Chikaru turned the tables on her like this, anyway? How had Shizuma allowed herself to become the object of pursuit? How had Naoko-sama's adorable little sister managed to turn the Etoile into a bundle of nerves, like an underclassman getting ready for a first date?

Shizuma met the eyes of her reflection and steadied herself. It was time to put herself in control again, and she knew just how to do it. From the very back of her wardrobe she pulled a black merry-widow. She held it up against herself and once more checked the mirror. Yes, this would do nicely.

Chikaru would have no idea what hit her.

The confidence afforded her by her chosen undergarments lasted right up until Shizuma found herself standing in front of the door to Chikaru's room down on the first floor of the Lulim wing. Taking as deep a breath as the boning of the merry-widow would allow, the Etoile again tried to steel herself against the unfamiliar mix of nervousness and apprehension. Finally, making her decision, she raised her hand and knocked twice.

"It's open," a soft voice called from inside.

Shizuma opened the door and cautiously slipped inside the dimly-lit room. The first things she noticed were the tea candles floating in a broad, shallow bowl of water on the Lulim president's desk (completely against regulations, as a small, still-dutiful part of her mind pointed out to her), shedding a soft glow over the room's interior. The second thing she noticed was the enormous pile of pillows stacked up at the head of Chikaru's bed.

The third thing she noticed was Chikaru herself, still dressed in her St. Lulim uniform, lounging against the pillows and holding a book which she had apparently been reading by candlelight. The younger girl's brown eyes shone in the near-darkness as she smiled up at Shizuma, setting the book to one side. "You came," she said softly.

"I did," Shizuma nodded, unsure of what else to say.

"I'm so glad," Chikaru whispered. She then patted the mattress beside her. "Make yourself comfortable."

For a moment, Shizuma froze, her resolve once again at an ebb. This was *Chikaru*, she reminded herself. Naoko's baby sister.

Naoko's all-grown-up, stunningly beautiful, charismatic, flat-out magnetic baby sister, adored and beloved by those around her in a way Shizuma doubted she could ever be again.

Shizuma found herself rooted to the spot, a familiar hollowness spreading through her as green eyes met brown. She suddenly remembered what had drawn her to attempt to kiss this enigma the previous week: seeing Chikaru filled her with an aching, yearning desire, the likes of which she had simply never felt in her young life. It was nothing like the fleeting affairs of the past year, and certainly nothing like the damnably brief joy she had felt with Kaori. No, this was something far more desperate. All she knew was that Chikaru had something she needed. Something she wanted.

And even as a distant voice in her mind screamed that this was wrong, the rest of her knew that she had only one way, now, to get what she wanted.

And so she found herself responding to that want in the only way she could. Keeping her eyes locked with the other girl's, Shizuma unfastened the tie of her uniform, then let it drop to the floor. One by one, she undid the buttons down the front of her bodice, feeling her confidence return as she gave her quizzically smiling host just a little at a time: just a hint of what lay beneath with each successive unfastening. Soon she slipped the elegant dress from one shoulder, then the other, and slid the black-and-white fabric down along her legs, stepping clear once it piled into the floor.

All the while, Chikaru's eyes never left hers.

Finally, though, the younger girl looked her up and down, from her black stockings to her dangerously low-cut *pantsu* to the corselet that was barely keeping her decolletage in check.

And then Chikaru did something that Shizuma would never have expected. She frowned. "My goodness, do you actually find *that* comfortable?"

"Do you like?" Shizuma asked.

"Don't get me wrong -- you're a goddess -- but… you poor thing, can you even *breathe?* "

"I could… take it off for you," Shizuma whispered in a desperate attempt to wrest control back.

"Shizuma, darling, I think you should take it off for *you* before your cups completely runneth over," Chikaru said with a chuckle. "And for me too, I suppose, because I can almost feel my ribs cracking in sympathy. Let me get you something else."

To Shizuma's ongoing surprise, Chikaru hopped down from her bed, went into the bathroom and returned with a white terrycloth bathrobe. "Here you are," she smiled as she held it out. She then politely averted her eyes to give the older girl some measure of privacy.

Moving in a daze, now, Shizuma unhooked her stockings from the body of her corselet, then unfastened the endless hooks along the back of the garment and slipped it off. She then reached for the robe, but her hand stopped short, and in a cracked, pleading voice she did not recognize as her own she whispered "Chikaru..?"

Chikaru turned to look at her again, and the easygoing, mischievous smile she'd been wearing turned into something far more complicated: an emotional cocktail of fondness, understanding and no small amount of sorrow. And was Shizuma imagining it, or was there a trace of guilt as well?

"You're beautiful," Chikaru said quietly. "Now please, put this on and get in my bed already."

Shizuma slipped the robe on as Chikaru returned to the bed and again propped herself up on the pillows. The Etoile joined her soon after, and Chikaru pulled her into a cozy embrace, allowing the older girl's head to rest against her shoulder. Even in her bewilderment, Shizuma found herself letting out a sigh of something like relief as those arms closed around her.

"We really need to talk, Shizuma," Chikaru said at length.

Next: Talk to me?

AUTHOR'S OTHER NOTE: Yeah, sorry, things get a bit serious this time around. At least one more part will follow. I wish to once again offer my most sincere, heartfelt gratitude to Ninemil, without whom Strawberry Panic would likely have just been (for me) a wonderful diversion before moving on to the next anime. Thank you for the inspiration, and for making me love these characters even more.

Talk to Me?

Part 3: Talk to Me?

"Comfy?" asked Chikaru after another long silence.

To her surprise, Shizuma found that she was just that. "What… what do we need to talk about?"

"Well, first of all, some numbers," Chikaru said briskly. "Thanks to my network of spies, of course."

"Network of spies?" Shizuma repeated. Everyone knew that Chikaru had the reputation of being all-seeing and all-knowing in spite of her limited visibility outside of her own school; the moniker "Shadow Empress of Astraea" had been hers for some time, after all.

"Everything finds its way to me eventually, you know," Chikaru went on, as though reading her thoughts. "So tell me, Etoile-sama. How many girls have you kissed in this academic year?"

Shizuma felt a flare of cold fury, and she pushed herself away to glare at the younger girl. "You didn't want me to come to bed with you," she said in an accusatory tone.

"Of course I did, silly," Chikaru assured her as she maintained her grip. "I do all my best talking here. Did you think I meant something else?"

"Don't give me that innocent look. You know very well what I thought you meant."

Chikaru looked at her thoughtfully. "Not with total certainty, but admittedly, I had the feeling you'd interpret it that way. Which gives me even more reason to want to talk to you, as it happens."

"Did you and Miyuki set me up for this? Another scolding for the naughty Etoile?"

"Miyuki had nothing to do with this," Chikaru smiled.

"She told me I should come," Shizuma growled. "She said you were *wonderful* ." The last was given with a sarcastic roll of the eyes.

"That's sweet of her to say. But I told you only the truth. I wanted you to come to bed with me so we could talk, because… I'm worried about you, Shizuma."

The Etoile paused, the sound of her unadorned name causing her building anger to quickly subside. Chikaru had always been so formal with her since Naoko and Kaori had died, but with that one piece of familiarity -- something she had so much as asked for during that attempt at seduction in the council room -- Shizuma suddenly remembered how close they had once been.

"I'm deeply sorry if I've embarrassed or shamed you," Chikaru went on, her serious face giving way to a wink. "Though I will say, you've got nothing to be ashamed of. Your beauty lives up to the legend."

"Lovely," Shizuma sighed, letting her head drop back to Chikaru's shoulder.

"Yes, you are. But we're getting away from my original question. Any guesses on the number?"

"I don't know… eight? Ten?"

"Nineteen," Chikaru corrected her.

Shizuma blinked slowly at this. She had suspected, in the back of her mind, that the number was a high one, but *nineteen?* "How do you know that?"

"Network of spies, remember? Aside from which, I spoke to each and every one of them after your affairs ended, and many of those

talks were right here in this bed. You'd be surprised at how many of the recently broken-up come and talk to me."

"I never wanted to hurt any of them," Shizuma said in a low voice, wincing inside at the thought of those broken hearts.

"And to a large degree, you haven't. I'll break down some of the numbers for you, shall I?"

"Numbers?"

"Of the nineteen," Chikaru went on, "eleven were from Miator, six from Spica, and two from Lulim. Gross underrepresentation of my beloved school, I might add, though I can't fault you for having the majority in your own hallways. Eight have said that their encounters with you left them uncertain about their own sexuality, while the other eleven have said that being with you convinced them once and for all what they were, with four of those self-identifying as lesbian, two as bisexual and five as heterosexual." She paused her for a moment and gave Shizuma an amused roll of the eyes. "So I'm afraid even your legendary beauty has limits."

"Why did you do this?" Shizuma asked, somewhat numbed by the barrage of statistics. "Why did you take it upon yourself to talk to all of them?"

"Well, I did seek a *few* of them out, but the majority of them came to me. I'm Naoko-sama's baby sister, remember, and I've inherited some of her reputation for mending broken wings. I have girls I've scarcely met come to me for advice all the time: it's the ones I once thought I knew well that somehow keep evading me."

This was said in a gentle voice, but Shizuma still felt as though she'd been slapped. Worse yet, she knew that Chikaru was telling the truth: they *had* been close once, before losing Naoko. With her gone, though, and Kaori ailing more than ever, there had not been time to help her friend mourn her loss.

Or more likely, she thought to herself darkly, she had not wanted to be reminded of the reality of a similar loss staring her in the face.

Dimly, she remembered that Chikaru had been one of the first to reach out to her after Kaori's death, but she hadn't been ready for it then, and eventually Chikaru had stopped trying, even as Shizuma drowned her sorrows with one affair after another.

Only now, it seemed that Chikaru had not stopped trying at all: she had merely been acting from within the shadows, as had become her method. She had taken it upon herself to clean up the emotional messes Shizuma had left behind.

"Why now?" she asked in a broken voice. "Why confront me now?"

Without a trace of her customary good humor, Chikaru shook her head slowly at the Etoile. "Because, silly Shizuma, I can't bear to see you doing this to yourself any longer. I had hoped that eventually it would stop, but things are only getting worse, and…" She paused, and said the next with apparent difficulty. "And as much as I'd like to be the good friend and say it's all about you, it's not. Most of the girls I've told you about were sad for a time, but have moved on. Most of them, particularly the more recent ones, held no illusion that they would be more to you than a distraction. But there was one, Shizuma, that you hurt, and hurt badly."

"Which?" Shizuma asked, her mind playing back a blurry succession of faces. To her shame and chagrin, she could not remember more than a few of the alleged nineteen. "Who was she? I never wanted to…"

"I know you didn't want to hurt anyone," Chikaru assured her, holding up one hand to stop her from continuing. "And I'm sorry, but it's not my place to tell you which it was. To be honest, I'm not comfortable telling you as much as I'm about to, but I think you need to know."

Still desperately trying to clearly grasp the images of these nineteen faces in her mind's eye, Shizuma waited for Chikaru to continue.

"One of these girls," the Lulim president said, slowly and deliberately, "was very lonely, and had been for some time, even to the point of despair. She carried herself well, though, and she hid it from everyone around her, praying that one day her loneliness would end. And then, quite suddenly, and quite to her surprise, she caught the eye of the Etoile, and everything changed. She thought you were the answer to her prayers, Shizuma. She thought that she'd met a kindred spirit, and that she'd never have to be lonely again."

Shizuma closed her eyes, not liking where this was going at all.

"After you broke things off with her, some of her classmates began to worry about her subsequent behaviors, and thanks to my network of spies, that worry was brought to me. Thankfully, in spite of being a classic hopeless romantic possessing an astonishing depth of emotion, she is at her heart a sensible girl. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about her safety for a time."

Tears filled Shizuma's eyes. She did not know what was worse: the fact that she had caused that kind of hurt, or the fact that she could not, for the life of her, think of who this girl had been. "I was lonely too," she said, as though that were enough somehow.

"I know you were," Chikaru said, tightening her arms around the Etoile. "And I know you still are. But Shizuma, this has to stop, if not for you then for the next girl who can't understand why you won't let her into your heart. It's hurting you, it's hurting them, and it's not…" Chikaru broke off, appeared to take a moment to gather herself, then went on. "It's not what Kaori would have wanted. She wouldn't have wanted your heart to die with her."

Shizuma wanted to scream at her, to rage at her for daring to use that name in such a way. She wanted to throw those words back in her face and demand how Chikaru could possibly know what such a loss felt like. How it had left a hole in her heart that she feared could never be healed.

But she could not do that. Even in her own self-absorbed hell, she knew that Chikaru had indeed suffered loss.

"Don't you miss Naoko?" was all she could ask.

"Every day," Chikaru whispered. "And I know it's not the same, Shizuma: no two losses are."

"How did you come back from it?" Shizuma sniffed.

"By living my life in her honor," Chikaru replied. "By continuing her work. By using the lessons she taught me. By letting her serenity and her wisdom inspire me. By letting her memory bring me joy rather than regret."

"I wish it were that easy."

To Shizuma's surprise, she found her face being gently turned upward to meet Chikaru's own, and the younger girl shifted so that they were less than a hands-breadth apart. "It won't be. But I need you to try, Shizuma. For you, for them… for Kaori. Open that magnificent heart again: it *will* hurt, but it has to hurt before it can heal."

Something stirred within Shizuma with those words, and she felt that selfsame heart beat faster as she once again realized the intimacy of their position. Those eyes were very close now, filling her vision.

"Let something real touch you again," Chikaru breathed. "Let your next kiss… truly *mean* something."

Shizuma closed her eyes and leaned forward, intending to do just that, but her lips touched only… fingers? Opening her eyes slowly, she saw that Chikaru had placed her hand between their faces, effectively blocking the kiss.

"But I'm afraid it can't be with me, Etoile-sama," Chikaru said gently. "It's… not my place."

"I'm sorry," Shizuma whispered. Just like that, she'd fallen right back into the very habit Chikaru was insisting that she break.

"I see we still have work to do," Chikaru sighed, a trace of amusement on that pretty face.

Next: Go on a Date With Me?

Go on a Date With Me?

Part 4: Go on a Date With Me?

The feeling of being completely at loose ends was actually a very welcome one. After two years as Etoile, Shizuma was finally an ordinary student again, and would be for the remaining few months of her time at Miator. The results of her university entrance examinations were in, and she would have her choice of several of the best in Japan for her continued education. And Nagisa…

She smiled to herself as she took a sip of her tea. For all the relief of her relinquished position and educational future, Nagisa was the true reason for her newfound feeling of freedom. After months of doubt, of dancing around one another, and of even convincing herself that it could never be, she and Nagisa were together at last. She knew, distantly, that there were challenges yet to come for them, particularly after Shizuma graduated without her, but for now they were happy, and it was finally possible to believe in forever again.

"May I join you, Shizuma-sama?" a voice asked, breaking her reverie.

Shizuma looked up to see a smiling Chikaru standing there, a mug of her own in hand. "Please," she said, indicating the seat opposite her.

The Lulim president seated herself, sipped her tea, and looked around the crowded student lounge before turning merry eyes on the former Etoile. "It's been a while since I've seen you by yourself like this," she commented.

"I suppose it has," Shizuma agreed. She was trying not to completely monopolize her new love's time, but they were certainly together more than not these days.

"I'm very happy for you, Shizuma," Chikaru said softly, letting out a small sigh as she did. "And are you? Happy, that is?"

"Very much so."

"That's good to hear."

Chikaru paused to take another drink, and Shizuma waited patiently for the other shoe to drop.

"Of course, you must realize that you're not finished yet," Chikaru ventured after she set down her mug.

Shizuma nearly laughed. "I figured you were going to say something like that."

"Then I'm glad we've once again come to know one another as well as we have," Chikaru beamed. "So what *do* you intend to do about Tamao-chan?"

"I'm trying to give them space," Shizuma sighed. "She's very important to Nagisa, and… they deserve the space to be best friends without the mean girlfriend taking Nagisa away all the time."

"Giving them space," Chikaru repeated. "Which, of course, is why you're sitting here at a table drinking tea alone, yet seated in such a position that you can keep an eye on the two of them as they do much the same at a table across the room?"

Shizuma closed her eyes and sighed again. Leave it to Chikaru to notice everything yet again. "I'm not… spying on them…"

"It's perfectly natural for you to be nervous on some level," Chikaru waved. "Everyone in the dorm knows how Tamao-chan felt about Nagisa-chan… with the possible exception of Nagisa-chan herself, bless her, though I'd be amazed if she's completely ignorant of it."

"You're being *very* reassuring," Shizuma deadpanned.

"I do my best. But if you *need* reassurance, Shizuma, I think you know what you need to do."

She had, in fact, thought at great length about her next step, but in a very real way this was going to be even more difficult than bursting into the cathedral to proclaim her love. "What can I say to her?" she whispered.

"I don't know," Chikaru admitted. "But whatever you say, I think she'll be willing to listen. And if you leave now, you might just catch her."

Shizuma looked past Chikaru to see that indeed, Nagisa and Tamao had gotten up from their table, and were leaving the student lounge separately. How could Chikaru have seen that? Did the Shadow Empress have eyes in the back of her head, as well?

Steeling herself with a stiff breath, Shizuma nodded once to Chikaru, stood, and strode across the room toward the object of her attention. She caught up with the girl halfway down the hall toward the main entrance.

"Suzumi-san?" she said.

Tamao froze at the sound of the former Etoile's voice, then turned and bowed to the older girl. "Shizuma-sama," she replied quietly. "If you're looking for Nagisa-chan, she was just on her way to our room…"

"Thank you, Suzumi-san, but it's you I wanted to speak to."

"Very well," Tamao nodded. Her dark eyes were hooded, though not unfriendly, and her face wore an expression of mild confusion.

"I was wondering," Shizuma said, hoping that she did not sound as nervous as she felt, "if you would like to go on… a date with me this afternoon, Suzumi-san?"

Tamao made it easy for her.

Realistically, Shizuma could never have expected this from the girl she'd hurt so thoroughly. Part of her had hoped, with no small amount of guilt, that simply doing as she had told Chikaru and giving the roommates space would be enough to absolve her of the pain she'd caused, but deep down, she'd known that she would have to face Tamao and apologize, if not in word then in action. She had expected anything from stony silence to outright hostility from the younger girl, and yet, in spite of the early awkwardness of this "date," Tamao had been nothing but pleasant company. Knowing of her love of literature, Shizuma had decided to take her to the best bookstore in town, and once in this comfortable setting, conversation came naturally and easily between the two who had been, until very recently, romantic rivals.

All along, Shizuma's amazement grew. Tamao had every right to hate her after all that had come to pass, and yet there they were, discussing poetry and classics like old friends. Where Shizuma had expected a struggle in this attempt to make some form of amends, Tamao was behaving as though she truly *wanted* this to go well. In one way, this made her feel even worse as she better got to know what an amazing young woman Tamao was, but even so, her profound relief every time she saw the girl smile was almost enough to bring tears to her eyes. In all, it seemed too good to be true.

Then, as they sat down to dinner at one of Shizuma's favorite local restaurants, there came the first indication that perhaps it was.

"Shizuma-sama," Tamao said steadily, after the waiter had left with their orders, "I… know what this is all about."

"What do you mean?" Shizuma asked, feeling the relief beginning to crumble just slightly as she met the other girl's sad eyes.

"I understand what this date was for," Tamao went on. "And I wanted you to know that you've nothing to worry about. You don't need to warn me to stay away from Nagisa-chan. She made her choice,

and…" Tamao looked away. "It would be disrespectful to both of you if I tried to interfere. I promise that after you graduate, I won't do anything to come between the two of you. You've made her very happy and… she deserves that."

"Tamao-chan," Shizuma said quietly, "that wasn't why I asked you out today." This was to some degree a lie, and Shizuma knew it: she could not deny that a part of her was breathing a happy sigh of relief at those words. But there was more to it than that. Much more. "I've truly enjoyed this, and… I hope we can do it again. I feel like I've made a new friend today against all odds."

"That's kind of you to say," Tamao blushed, but it was clear from her expression that she did not necessarily believe it.

"It's true, Tamao-chan. After all that's happened, it almost seems too much to hope for, yet it would be an honor if you would consider me your friend. But there are some things I need to tell you first, and then you can decide on your own whether or not I deserve that honor."

"Like what?" Tamao asked, still looking away.

Shizuma took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm sorry, Tamao-chan," she began. "I'm sorry it happened this way, and that I was the one to break your heart… for the second time in as many years, no less."

At those last words, Tamao flinched for a moment, then turned sad, surprised eyes on the former Etoile. "I didn't think you remembered."

"For a long time I didn't," Shizuma admitted, and now she was the one who had to look away. "I'm not proud of the person I was last year. I hate myself for hurting you the way I did, especially since…" She paused, wondering if it would hurt even more to say this, but finally she went on. "Especially since I barely remember it, even now. You were part of a shameful blur in my life, and I wish I'd never pulled you or anyone else into that place with me."

For a long time, the only sounds were the pleasant chatter from the other restaurant patrons, the soft music, and the distant noises from the kitchen. Then, a voice Shizuma barely recognized as Tamao's broke the tension between them.

"It was the second Friday in September," Tamao whispered. "I was coming back from a comparative literature class. We'd just been given results on a test, and I was pleased with myself for my perfect marks. I was just wondering what to have for lunch when you were suddenly there next to me. You took my hand, and… pulled me away into an empty classroom. Before I really knew what was happening, you were kissing me, and holding me so tightly against you that I could feel your heart beating against your uniform. You… you told me I was beautiful, and asked me if that had been my first kiss. I told you it was, and you looked into my eyes and said that it wasn't your first, but perhaps I'd be your last."

Shizuma felt as though her heart were being pressed by a cold steel vise as she heard these words and recognized them as the same she'd used while courting Nagisa. She wondered darkly if they had been the only two, or if there had been countless girls to whom she'd said that along the way before finally finding the one for whom it could be true. Had it been a suppressed memory of this shame that had caused her to react so forcefully that day when she learned it was Tamao who had given Nagisa that red ribbon on her wrist?

"You kissed me again, first on the lips, then on the neck, and I felt as though the angels had come to Earth and were singing inside my heart. I… knew about your reputation, but in that moment, when you said that to me, I *believed* . I truly believed that I, lonesome little Suzumi Tamao, would be the one blessed with the chance to make the Etoile happy, and to be by her side always."

The vise continued to twist. How hard had it been for this girl to push the object of her affection into the arms of someone who'd hurt her so?

"I was very sad afterward, when you didn't seem to remember me," said Tamao in a level tone. "I wrote some poems that I think might have scared people, equating loss of love with loss of life. Not the happiest metaphor ever, but… as I said, I was very sad, and that was the only way I could think of to express it."

"I'm so sorry, Tamao-chan," Shizuma whispered.

"There's something I need to know, Shizuma-sama," Tamao went on, still speaking in a very neutral voice. "At that rehearsal before the Etoile election, when you danced with Nagisa-chan to show us how to do it properly, you… said something then. You said that dancing was love, and that you knew… that the two of us would be able to do it. Watching you dance with her, I was ready to give up, but then you said that, and… I thought you were giving me your blessing. I thought *you* were giving up, and giving me the chance to be the one to love her. Did I imagine that, Shizuma-sama?"

Shizuma closed her eyes. How many times was she going to have to hurt this girl? For a moment, she considered lying, but she could not bring herself to do so. "No, you were right," she sighed. "At that moment, I'd given up. I wanted that last dance, but I was ready to let her go, because I was convinced I didn't deserve her."

Part of Shizuma wanted something to happen to break the mood, whether it be the food arriving, or a server bringing more water, or perhaps the building catching on fire. Anything to stop this before it could get any uglier. The rest of her, though, knew that she had this coming.

This was why what Tamao said next shocked her to the core. "I'm glad you changed your mind. I'm… glad you came back for her."

Shizuma looked up at the other girl and stared unblinking into those dark eyes. "T- Tamao-chan?"

"It… took me a while, but… I know now that you were the one for her all along," Tamao elaborated. "My… attraction for Nagisa-chan

brought things out in me that I'm not proud of, and it's clear to me now that I wasn't ready for her. I would have tried very hard to make her happy, but… for selfish reasons. I think I would have held too tightly, and in the end I would have hurt her, or worse, driven her away."

I did all of those things too, Tamao-chan.

"And besides," Tamao finished, "in the end, *you* were the one *she* wanted. And to me, that's really the most important thing."

For a long while, Shizuma could only stare at this incredible young woman, and she found herself reminded of those words Chikaru had said to her almost a year ago, before Shizuma had even realized who they had described: *In spite of being a classic hopeless romantic possessing an astonishing depth of emotion, she is at her heart a sensible girl.*

Yet for all her good sense, Shizuma had to wonder how much Tamao believed her own words, and how much she was simply trying to *make* herself believe them. One thing was certain, though: Shizuma could not *help* but believe her. This girl would stand by her convictions and back away if it meant her beloved Nagisa would be happy.

In other words, she would do what Shizuma, in the end, could not have done.

"May I ask a favor of you, Shizuma-sama?" Tamao asked then.

"Of course."

The younger girl stared levelly at her. "Make her happy. Not because I'll be waiting to swoop in if you fail, because I don't *want* that. Make her happy because she makes *you* happy. Make her happy because her smile lights up the world. Make her happy because… I can't possibly be sad when I see her smile, even if I know it's not for me."

Shizuma reached across the table to take the girl's hand. "I don't deserve either one of you."

At this, for the first time since sitting down at the table, Tamao smiled. "Nagisa-chan would disagree with that," she reminded the former Etoile. "And far be it for me to argue with my Nagisa-chan."

Next: Marry Me?

Marry Me?

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The second part of this story is more or less a re-telling of a scene from *Hand Me Downs*, so for those who've been there, yes, I am recycling my dialogue in a big way. (Remember: recycle, reuse, reduce!)

AUTHOR'S NEXT NOTE: Thanks go out to Wicked White Queen and Ninemil, both of whom have given me reason to think about a certain character who has been, as yet, almost completely absent from my fics. Thanks for the inspiration, both here and in the forthcoming chapter of *Strange Fire* .

Part 5: Marry Me?

It took a considerable amount of effort on the part of the hairdresser to get Miyuki's veil attached, given the overall lack of hair to be dressed.

Shizuma watched from a safe distance as the bride-to-be continued to be fussed over. At some point since last they'd seen one another at graduation, someone had gone after that dark hair with clippers, and Shizuma figured it had to have been Miyuki herself who had done it: her parents had never even liked the bob she'd worn through her latter years of school, and surely they would never have approved of something so drastic as this.

By the time the dresser, makeup artist and hairdresser had finished their jobs and vanished, leaving the two former schoolmates alone, Miyuki looked positively stunning in her bridal gown, severe haircut or not. As traditional as the Rokujo family might be, it seemed that even they had seen fit to opt for a Western wedding, right down to the last inch of virginal white cloth in the train of the dress. The high collar sparkled with what were almost certainly diamonds, and the

veil shimmered like a waterfall frozen in the moment as it cascaded down her back.

Noticing the attention, Miyuki shot her friend a sardonic smile that completely failed to reach her eyes, then tweaked the fringe of her too-damned-short hair and rolled her eyes. "My last bit of rebellion," she chuckled mirthlessly. "Not that it's done any good, of course. My mother raged, but in the end I'll be a happy bride, come what may."

There was something very wrong with Miyuki's voice: she seemed on the verge of breaking, though whether it would be into tears or hysterical laughter was impossible to guess. "It looks… nice, Miyuki-chan."

"Oh, stuff it. You always liked my hair longer and you know it."

"No, I mean it. You look beautiful."

"Well, no expense was spared to make Rokujo's prime filly presentable for her parade down the aisle. Mother and father wouldn't have it any other way."

Shizuma closed her eyes. She had known that this would be difficult, but she hadn't counted on just how terrible a blow it would be to see proud, stoic Miyuki reduced to this. She knew she should have made a better effort to keep in contact with her oldest friend, but in the end, she had felt too ashamed. How could she flaunt her happiness in front of someone whose fate had been determined since childhood, and whose arranged marriage was all the more tragic now that she knew her affections lay exclusively with her own gender? Had Miyuki felt any attraction at all toward men, then maybe there could at least be hope that she might come to love her husband one day, but as things were? The rest of her life would be a lie. She would go to her wedding bed with the knowledge that no one would ever love her the way she needed.

To her surprise, Miyuki broached the topic first. "So how are you and Nagisa?"

"We're… well," Shizuma said distractedly. "It was hard at first, being away from her at University, but we're in frequent contact now. It took a transfer student friend of Chikaru's to give us the idea and take the first step for us, but now we see one another by webcam several times a week."

"Mmm, bordering on a dormitory rules violation," Miyuki nodded. "Interesting behavior for a former Etoile and a former Etoile candidate, wouldn't you say?"

A former Etoile candidate… Shizuma had been long debating whether or not she should ask this question, as it had been bothering her for months now. "Miyuki," she asked carefully, "why did you *really* choose Nagisa to run for Etoile?"

"What do you mean, *really?* " Miyuki asked, arching her eyebrows.

"I mean… was it for Miator, or… was it for me?"

Miyuki stared at Shizuma across the dressing room for a good twenty seconds before she gave a snort of laughter. "There's the Shizuma I remember. It had to be about you after all, didn't it?"

"Please, Miyuki," Shizuma protested quietly, but there was a part of her that felt she deserved it.

"I honestly thought that the two of them were the best chance Miator had. Suzumi-san was a hard-working, dutiful student who was well respected by her peers, if somewhat lacking in social skills due to her previous isolation. Aoi-san was a perfect complement, being gregarious, popular, and well-loved by the students of all three schools. The way she stepped into Chikaru's dress and finished the Carmen performance at your side had given her an almost legendary status. I'm still convinced that the two of them truly won the election, and Miator's honor would have been preserved had it not been for certain… *dramatic* events."

"I had to do it," Shizuma sighed.

"That being said," Miyuki went on, as if she hadn't heard, "I'd gauge that it was about… a sixty-forty split between Miator and you."

Shizuma looked up at the bride-to-be, and her eyes widened in shock. "What?"

"I didn't think she was good enough for you, Shizuma," Miyuki said in a conversational tone. There was not a hint of malice in her voice, nor any disapproval in her expression. "God help her, there were days when she seemed more a wilting flower than little Konohana-san, and I didn't know such a thing was possible. I didn't think she had the emotional fortitude to love you and support you the way you needed, or indeed deserved. Frankly, I'm still not convinced, but since we haven't spoken since graduation, I haven't had the chance to be swayed one way or the other."

"I'm sorry," Shizuma flinched, the barb having hit home expertly. "She *is* strong, though. Stronger than I knew possible."

"She'd better be," Miyuki nodded. "But at the time, I had my doubts, and I thought perhaps nudging her away from you would be better for all concerned parties. She and Suzumi-san would have one another for support, if nothing else, and you'd be free to move on to someone who could love you with all her strength."

"Someone like you?" Shizuma asked, because it had to be said.

They looked into each other's eyes for a long time until Miyuki at last broke contact and turned away. "In my wildest dreams, maybe," she sighed. "But yes, perhaps someone like me. I used to have this dream that one day we'd have the chance to save one another. I'd save you from your heartbreak, and you'd save me from this sham of a marriage, and then we could be…" She paused and shook her head. "We could be what we are, and not what anyone else would want us to be."

She was barely holding back tears now, and something inside Shizuma snapped at the sight of it. "Miyuki-chan, you can still be

what you are. Don't go through with this marriage. Let's leave this church right here and now. We could… we could rent a house together, and I could put you through school. You could live your own life and find your own love."

"You know I can't do that," Miyuki whispered. "There's a reason why some dreams have to remain just that."

"Miyuki…"

"Do you love her?"

Shizuma blinked at the question. "Do I..?"

"Nagisa. Do you love her? Do you want to spend the rest of your life with her in spite of the roles the rest of the world would try to push you into? Will she make you happy until you're old and… even more silver-haired than you are already? Will my dear friend Shizuma, whom I love and cherish more than anyone else in this cruel, unfair world, be fulfilled by this girl?"

After blinking a few more times at the barrage of heartfelt words, Shizuma nodded. "Yes… I think I will."

Something softened in Miyuki's expression, and indeed in her entire bearing. "Then I can try to be happy, even married to a man I know barely at all and want even less. I can walk down the aisle feeling more like a contented friend than a lamb being led to slaughter."

"Why would that ever be enough?" Shizuma asked helplessly, thinking back on the string of people who had always been looking out for her happiness, sometimes even to their own detriment. What had she done to deserve the love and respect of those she had only hurt? "How can it possibly fulfill you just to know that I have a chance at leading a happy life?"

"You really don't know, do you?" Miyuki asked, and this time the amusement seemed real.

"I guess I don't."

"You're… one of those amazing people. When you're the real Shizuma… the one who burst into that cathedral, not the one who sleepwalked through the year leading to that moment… you have a way of *drawing* people to you, so that they can bask in your light. Whether we choose to be planets around your sun or moths around your flame… well, that's our lookout. But you're a light in a dark world, my darling Shizuma, and if you're shining, how can anyone who truly loves you do anything but share that happiness with you?"

Vividly, Shizuma was reminded of a similar thing Tamao had said about Nagisa some months ago. Nagisa had become everyone's light, too, especially Shizuma's own.

As if reading her mind, Miyuki nodded. "Light up the world with her, Shizuma-chan. Don't let this chance slip away. Don't make me go into this mockery of a union without the knowledge that the one I love most will do everything in her power to hold onto this girl… and be *happy* ."

Four days, a long drive and a rain-soaked walk across campus later, Shizuma was back in Strawberry Hall, dripping on the carpet of the dorm room shared by Nagisa and Tamao, having decided to forego their normal Wednesday night webcam chat for an infinitely more personal talk. Taking pity on her, Tamao brought towels and a clean bathrobe, and soon after, Shizuma re-emerged from the bathroom wearing the robe and trying desperately to tamp down her hair with one of the towels.

As she'd hoped, Chikaru and Hazuki had been able to make it this evening as well. As much as she wished Miyuki could be here as well, she knew that she wanted Chikaru, at least, to be a part of this, one way or the other.

After some initial chit-chat, Nagisa was still staring at her as though unable to mentally reconcile her unexpected appearance, so

Shizuma turned her full attention to her beloved and got down to the reason for her being there. "There's something I need to talk to you about, Nagisa, and once I decided, I knew I couldn't wait another day. I wish the weather would have cooperated more, but in the end, it doesn't matter."

After looking for a moment into Nagisa's wide, trusting eyes, she continued. "When I went away to University, Nagisa, I was terrified that I would lose you. Not to anyone specific," she winked at Tamao, hoping that this simple gesture would convey her trust and gratitude, "but just to… absence. I thought you'd drift away from me, or that you'd begin to think of what we had as a dream from your past."

Nagisa shook her head, her breath coming in a soft gasp. "I could never…"

"I know that now," Shizuma nodded, squeezing her girlfriend's hands, "but there was more to be afraid of than just that. We're lucky, Nagisa. Our families accept who we are and what we have, at least for now, but I can't promise you that being with me will be easy once we're both in that unforgiving world outside Astraea Hill. Here, we have something beautiful and romantic, and we have friends to celebrate it with. There, we're just *different*, and there are so many people who will take great pleasure in reminding us of that, every day of our lives. So that's pretty terrifying, too." She thought of Miyuki, somewhere in Europe on her loveless honeymoon, and felt her jaw clench at the injustice of it all.

"I know," Nagisa whispered. "It's hard not to be scared of that."

"But in the end," Shizuma said, feeling her throat begin to constrict with emotion, "I love *you* more than I'm afraid of *them* . While I thought you might drift away this year, you've only gotten closer to me, and I'm grateful to the help our friends have given us in that regard." She smiled at Hazuki, then turned back to Nagisa and breathed deeply to steady herself. "I pictured this moment many times, Nagisa. And even though I never thought it would happen in

your dorm room while I was wearing a bathrobe… I simply don't care, because I won't wait another minute."

Oddly mindful that Tamao's robe was far too short for her, Shizuma carefully knelt before Nagisa, reached into the pocket of the borrowed garment, and brought out the small box she'd not taken out of her hand even as she'd driven here all the way from Tokyo. "Aoi Nagisa, in the presence of these friends and loved ones, I ask for…" Her voice failed her at the last moment, and she grinned despite herself at the less-than-smooth delivery. The words mattered most, after all. "Please… marry me, Nagisa." She opened the box, revealing the platinum-and-gold braided engagement band inside.

Nagisa's eyes filled with tears, and for a terrifying moment, Shizuma wondered if this had been the right thing to do. Was it too soon? Was it too much?

But then Nagisa lit up her world with a single choked word.

"Yes…"

Shizuma's smile became impossibly wider, and Nagisa found her voice at last. "Yes, yes, of course I will!"

Nagisa held out her hand to allow Shizuma to place the ring onto her finger, then they embraced, laughing. And then Chikaru was hugging Nagisa, and the normally somber Hazuki was tearfully embracing Shizuma, and everything became a happy, warm blur.

Peripherally aware that Tamao was sobbing happy tears into Nagisa's shoulder, Shizuma next found herself in Chikaru's arms. "Well done," the Lulim president whispered into her ear, following this with a kiss on the cheek.

"This is just the beginning," Shizuma whispered in reply, flashing her old friend a nervous smile.

"As it should be, my darling," Chikaru winked.

Shizuma looked for Tamao, hoping for the chance to hug her as well, but she was already wrapped in Hazuki's strong arms, and Chikaru returned to sandwich her between the two of them as Nagisa once more faced her fiancée (*fianc é e!*) and slipped her arms around her. "Thank you, my love," Shizuma whispered.

At this point, Nagisa finally appeared to remember the ring, and she turned her left hand to watch the patterns of light on its surface. "It's beautiful," she smiled, but then her face darkened. "But the uniform code…"

Shizuma had been prepared for this; from deeper in the box she pulled an elegant silver chain. "Sadly, as your former Etoile, I'm aware of the rule. So you can wear it under your uniform with this. It's long enough that it should hang next to your heart. One of my favorite places to be."

Nagisa looked from the chain to the front of her uniform. "More like right between my breasts," she giggled.

"Yes, well, that's one of my favorite places to be, too." Shizuma winked, remembering that night after Summer School when they had first kissed. Now, thankfully, she could remember it without regret.

She then turned to the three "witnesses," feeling her heart swell with affection as she spoke to each of them in turn. "I'm honored that you could be here," she bowed. "You can't know how much you've meant to me, all three of you, for all you've done for Nagisa…" This was said directly to Tamao, who had been a better friend to both of them than Shizuma could ever have hoped.

"… for the two of us…" she went on, nodding to Hazuki, the former outsider whose ability to simply think outside the Strawberry had been such a boon to them.

Last, she turned to Chikaru, remembering a kiss that never was, and wondering not for the first time if she'd be where she was now if not for that moment, and the ones that had followed. "… and for me."

Chikaru nodded, her eyes twinkling as always, and in that brief exchange Shizuma knew that Chikaru understood. "Congratulations to you both," the Lulim president smiled. She then very deliberately took the other two girls by the hand and pulled them toward the door. "In honor of the newly engaged, however, I think some time alone is merited, so I do believe Hazuki, Tamao and I will be going to my room now to have some hot lesbian sex."

Nagisa made a small "meep" noise, her mind having apparently gone to the same place as Shizuma's, but Chikaru shot them a mischievous grin before the trio disappeared. "And by 'lesbian sex,' of course, I mean *tea* . But it *will* be hot."

The door closed, and for a while neither of the newly committed couple said a word. At last, though, Nagisa took a breath to say something, and immediately blushed.

"What is it?" Shizuma asked, grinning at her beloved's continued ability to embarrass herself by her thoughts alone.

"Um… I was just wondering… would you like to follow their suggestion?"

"Oh, most certainly."

"Only… without the tea?"

"Without the tea."

Next (Last?): Come Live With Me?

Come Live With Me?

Part 6: Come Live With Me?

After several years of high visibility during her schooling at Miator, Shizuma was quite content with her life as an anonymous university student. Being one of seven thousand underclassmen certainly helped in that regard: even her distinctive silvery-white mane was easily lost in the crowd, and for all intents and purposes she was just another Freshman getting close to wrapping up her first full year. Not an Étoile, not a daughter of wealth: just Hanazono-san in the ninth row.

While she occasionally ran into fellow alumni from Astraea, none of them had been particularly close to her, so she did not go out of her way to socialize with them, or anyone else, really. Her days were filled with classes, her evenings with study time in either the library or the living room of her apartment, and other than her ongoing web-chat correspondence with Nagisa and the weekly calls to her mother, she had become quite the hermit.

It thus came as a bit of a surprise when, one Saturday morning in February, there came a knock on her apartment door.

For a good thirty seconds she simply froze, her mug of tea halfway to her lips and her book open in her still-pajama-clad lap. Who in the world would be coming to see her here? Solicitors were prohibited, and none of her classmates had ever visited her in the past.

A second knock came, and feeling more curious than cautious now, Shizuma set her mug and book on the coffee table, got up from the sofa, and padded to the door.

The smiling face greeting her from the doorstep was so incredibly out of context that once again Shizuma could do nothing but freeze.

Green eyes widened as they stared into familiar brown, and Shizuma heard herself gasp as she took in the remaining details of her unexpected guest: an extremely fetching black and red dress, long black hair with a narrow braid to either side of her face, and most telling of all, the ever-present hair-clips decorated with red bows.

"Chikaru..?" she managed.

"Good morning, Shizuma," Chikaru bowed. "I do hope I've not come calling at an inconvenient time?"

In response, Shizuma opened the door the rest of the way, took the necessary step forward, and embraced her old friend warmly and (in retrospect) even a little fiercely. "Chikaru..!" she repeated. "But what… why are… how did you..?"

"Forgive me, but I asked Nagisa-chan for your address," Chikaru smiled against her. "I thought perhaps I'd surprise you, and it appears I've succeeded."

"It's… I'm so glad to see you!"

"I gathered that," Chikaru giggled, tightening her arms around the other girl. "And it's mutual, my dear Shizuma. Very much so."

Suddenly aware that she was standing outside in her pajamas engaging in a very public display of affection, Shizuma stepped out of the hug, but managed to keep one of Chikaru's hands in her own. "Well… please, come in! What in the world brings you here?"

"I literally happened to be in the neighborhood," said Chikaru as she stepped inside and slipped off her shoes. "Pardon the intrusion. I've always wanted to see Tokyo University, you see, and I hoped I might prevail upon a native guide, as it were, to show me the sights? If your schedule will allow it, of course?"

"Hmm, my social calendar *is* pretty full," Shizuma pondered, having recovered sufficiently from her shock to be able to joke around a bit.

"I have an early appointment with… reading, and then a couple of very important meetings with… reading, and lest I forget, dinner with reading this evening. But I'm sure I can pencil in an old friend."

Less than an hour later, they were on university grounds. They toured the historic Hongo Campus, which was Shizuma's goal for her upperclassman study. They made a point of passing through *Akamon*, the Red Gate (one of the few surviving structures from the Edo era, when this land had belonged to a noble family), as well as visiting the centuries-old garden now commonly referred to as Sanshiro Pond. Next, they took a train to the Komaba Campus, where Shizuma and her fellow undergraduates worked on completing their general education requirements. They saw the clock tower, the central plaza, and the library (up to and including Shizuma's favorite study spot on the fourth floor), then simply meandered about, taking in the atmosphere.

All the while, Shizuma regaled Chikaru with stories of the trials and tribulations of her life as a freshman, while Chikaru asked questions and laughed along with the answers. Oddly, Shizuma was finding herself completely at ease in Chikaru's company: not that this in itself was unusual, given their years of friendship, but somehow it felt different here. Today, on this campus, Shizuma was feeling almost giddy to be in the younger girl's company, and for a long time she could not put her finger on why, exactly. After all, she had visited Astraea several times since graduation, and seen Chikaru at least briefly during each of those visits. In point of fact, it had been less than a month since they had last seen one another, so why was she having to constantly restrain herself from hugging Chikaru, or holding her hand as they walked?

It was then that Shizuma realized that (with one notable and rather traumatic exception) this was the first time a friend from her past had come to her new home, and witnessed her new life. And only now, walking the campus in Chikaru's company, did Shizuma truly realize how *lonely* that new life had been. As much as she had come to

appreciate her anonymity, and as much as she loved to joke with Nagisa about her apartment being her hermitage, the simple addition of one good friend had changed everything.

Shizuma *missed* this. Desperately.

While not nearly as crowded as it was on the typical weekday, there were still a great many students about, and as they continued their wandering, Shizuma noticed a particularly large crowd near the main entrance, gathered around a series of notice boards. "Oh!" she exclaimed, as a memory clicked into place. "That's right: today's the day they post entrance exam results, isn't it?"

"So it appears," Chikaru nodded, a trace of a smirk on her lips.

"That was quite a day for me," Shizuma sighed, remembering the anxiety that led up to that moment of euphoria when she saw her test number on the list. "I'd already been accepted at a few other schools, including Kyodai, but… to have the chance to study *here*…"

She trailed off, grasping for a realization that simply would not come.

Why had Chikaru come today, of all days? Unless…

"Chikaru," she said slowly, "did you sit the entrance exam?"

"I did indeed," Chikaru nodded, the smirk breaking free a little more.

Shizuma stared slack-jawed at the other girl for several seconds, then grabbed her hand and began pulling her toward the notice boards. "Then why on Earth didn't you *say* so? Come on, let's see!"

"Calm down, Shizuma," Chikaru laughed, taking Shizuma's hand with both of her own and easing her to a stop. "No need to rush."

"But… don't you want to see..?"

"I already have," Chikaru giggled, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "I came to check before I went to your apartment. I passed,

Shizuma."

Shizuma had originally hoped to take Chikaru to a celebratory lunch at one of her favorite off-campus restaurants to mark this momentous occasion, but apparently dozens upon scores of other future Todai students had had the same idea, so eventually they wound up getting take-out and heading back to Shizuma's apartment.

"I must say, I'm a little surprised," Shizuma eventually told her over dessert. "Not that you passed, mind you, because everyone knows you're brilliant, but… I thought you might go to a conservatory to study music, or theater."

"I've been contacted by a few," Chikaru nodded, a flicker of what looked like genuine pride crossing her features. "It's tempting, certainly, but I also know that these will always be a part of my life, regardless of where I study. Aside from which, I have… other ambitions to fulfill, and this may be the perfect place to begin that journey."

"Then…" Shizuma began, but quickly stopped herself, still struggling to ask the question she'd been desperate to blurt out since first hearing Chikaru's news. "Then… will you..?" she finally managed.

There was a long pause before Chikaru spoke. "It's a difficult decision," she said softly. "Like you, I've also passed the exam for Kyodai, and… it can't be denied that there would be… *benefits* to studying a little closer to home…"

Shizuma felt her building excitement quickly turn into a chill inside her. "You mean… Tamao and Hazuki, don't you?"

"The idea of being far from them is… daunting, yes," Chikaru whispered, unable to meet Shizuma's eyes.

"I understand," Shizuma nodded. "I felt the same way about being away from Nagisa." Shizuma knew that Chikaru's relationship with Tamao and Hazuki was complicated, to say the least, and even though her bond with them was apparently not sexual in nature, it was obvious to anyone with half a romantic brain how much the three of them loved one another.

"How did you finally decide?" Chikaru asked her.

"In the end it was Nagisa who insisted I come here," Shizuma smiled wryly. "She knows I want to study medicine, and where better than the most prestigious university in Japan? She even says she'll go to as many cram schools as it takes to join me."

"That sounds remarkably similar to what they told me before I made this trip," Chikaru laughed faintly. "They want this for me, but at the same time…"

Shizuma found that she was holding her breath, waiting for the other girl to continue.

"Is it unbearable, being away from Nagisa?" Chikaru asked at last.

"Sometimes," Shizuma admitted. "But I also know she's with good friends who will take care of her while I can't, and… I can endure, knowing that."

"You know, I used to think I could endure anything," Chikaru said with a wry chuckle. "I certainly never thought I'd be in *this* position, but… please don't tell anyone I said this, but the thought of being alone is terrifying to me now."

Shizuma felt her chest tighten as a million thoughts struggled to get out. "But… you wouldn't have to be alone."

Chikaru looked up to meet the other girl's eyes. "Shizuma?"

The dam broke, and Shizuma reached across the table to take both of Chikaru's hands. "Come live with me, Chikaru. We'll rent a house together, and we'll go to school together, and we can cook for each other and play stupid video games together, and we can help each other study, and we can commiserate over our long-distance relationships and talk about how cute our significant others are, and when things get lonely we can snuggle on the couch together in a totally non-threatening Platonic way, and we can take cheesecake pictures of one another to send to our girlfriends, and we can wash each other's backs in the bath in *once again* a *completely* non-threatening faithful-to-our-loved-ones way, and we could…" She broke off suddenly at the look of shock on Chikaru's face, and felt her own cheeks suddenly go flaming hot with embarrassment at what she'd let spill out.

"Shizuma, you poor thing," Chikaru said at last. "It really *has* been lonely for you, hasn't it?"

"I- I'm sorry, that was selfish of me to ask," Shizuma stammered, feeling as though the blush was now covering her whole body. "I was just thinking that as long as we were both alone, at least maybe we could be alone… together..? I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Chikaru smiled softly. "That was very sweet."

If anything, the blush was only getting worse, and Shizuma had to look away. "But it wouldn't be fair to ask you to make your decision for *my* sake."

There was a pause, and then to Shizuma's surprise, Chikaru laced their fingers together and gave her hands an affectionate squeeze. "In truth, Shizuma, the decision was made the moment I saw my test number on that board."

"It was?" Shizuma asked, looking up at her again.

Chikaru nodded. "I *will* be going to Todai. Honestly, I'd be a fool not to, never mind the fact that my mother would never forgive me if I

tested in only to decline. And even though a year apart from them will be a very special hell for me, it's only one year of the many more we'll have together." She smiled at these words, as though remembering an inside joke. "So yes, Shizuma, I'll be joining you in these hallowed halls very soon, and… it would be an honor and a pleasure to live with you as well, if that is truly your wish."

Shizuma stood to circle around the table, and Chikaru met her halfway in what could only be called a bearhug.

Truly, another year without Nagisa at her side promised to be difficult, but having a dear friend to help fill that void would make all the difference in the world. As well, if Shizuma could help Chikaru fill the emptiness in her own heart, then it would indeed be an honor and a pleasure.

"We'll get a big house," Shizuma said in Chikaru's ear. "A big house with enough room for all of them to come join us after next year."

"Sounds perfect."

"Maybe something with its own private onsen."

"An onsen, eh?"

"Purely for non-threatening, completely faithful bonding between close friends, of course."

"Of course."

"Just like our trip to *Amanohashidate* . Think of how nice it will be once all five of us are there, and we can all bathe together every night if we want to."

"Obviously this year alone has been harder on you than either of us thought…"

Next (Last): Stay With Me Always?

Stay With Me Always?

Part 7: Stay With Me Always?

"I have a marvelous idea," Miyuki said suddenly.

As was often the case, Shizuma noted, Miyuki's "marvelous idea" was given voice only after she had been drinking a little. Or indeed a lot. More than the rest of them, at any rate.

The house she and her four roommates were renting had apparently once been a small inn, which meant that not only was there room for Shizuma, Nagisa, Chikaru, Tamao and Hazuki to each have a room of their own (not that there had ever been a time when all five of them had been in use simultaneously), but they also had plenty of room for guests. Over the years, this had meant plenty of visits from Miyuki, Kaname, Amane and/or Hikari, Shion once or twice, and even some of Hazuki's more… *colorful* friends now and again.

Since the hotel-turned-house had also come equipped with a very pleasant outdoor bath, many evenings, including this one, had ended up right here in the steaming water.

"Do tell, Miyuki," Chikaru smiled, languidly stretching her arms over her head before laying them along the stone rim of the onsen, one around Tamao and the other around Hazuki.

Miyuki put down her sake and regarded them each in turn. "What we have here is seven lesbians in a hot spring together. *Not a word*, Chikaru, because you *count*, and don't try to convince me otherwise."

"I wasn't going to say anything," Chikaru snorted.

"Here's the thing, though," Miyuki went on, her tone leading Shizuma to wonder just how much sake she had consumed thus far. "You two

may be a happy couple, and you three may be a happy threesome, and you," she brought her pointer finger to Kaname, who arched an eyebrow at her, "well, I don't know where you fit in, but hear me out. Shizuma, you know damned well I had a thing for you, and I sure as hell haven't forgotten the time you groped my boobs in the Student Council bath back before you and Nagisa-chan were an item."

"Indeed…" Shizuma nodded bemusedly.

"And you and *she*," Miyuki went on, pointing first at Nagisa and then at Tamao, "have more history than an unabridged copy of *the Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and sometimes I think the entire world is holding its breath waiting for you to finally give in and go at it like rutting weasels. And *you*," she indicated Kaname, "have been cleverly disguising your attraction for *her*," the finger went to Hazuki, "with all those panting, grunting, sweaty spars you keep having. As for Chikaru, I think everyone in this damned onsen has wanted a piece of *her* at one time or another, am I right?"

"Are we coming to a point anytime soon, Miyuki?" Kaname asked, looking annoyed.

"Here's my idea," Miyuki nodded, holding up one finger in an "a-ha" pose. "For one hour, maybe two if we feel like we're up to it, we call a temporary truce. All relationships are temporarily forgotten, and everyone is fair game. We can clear away our mutual baggage like proper lesbians, with nothing off limits. Anything goes. Kissing, groping, multiple orgasms, whatever. Knock yourselves out. And then, when the bell rings, we go back to where we are now, with no harm done, no bonds broken, and a few extra happy memories to take with us. What do you say?"

For a long time, the only sound was that of the lapping waters of the onsen, but then Hazuki cleared her throat. "Um… with respect, Miyuki-san, I don't think I'd be anywhere near comfortable with that."

"Neither would I," Tamao agreed, but Shizuma noticed the guilty smile she flashed in Nagisa's direction.

"Yeeeaaah, I think you're gonna be outvoted here," Kaname snorted. "Not that you don't make a few good points," she then added, shooting a mock-smoldering look at Hazuki and making a kissing sound.

"Honestly, Miyuki, are you trying to instigate an orgy?" Shizuma frowned. "You of all people should know how happy we are with what we have."

"I know *I* am," Nagisa agreed. "Not that Miyuki-san isn't beautiful, of course, but…" Her reflexive attempt at reassurance turned into a blush, and she cuddled more closely to Shizuma, obviously embarrassed once more by her own mental images.

Miyuki sighed loudly and took another drink of her sake. "I hate you all, you know," she muttered. "I only keep coming here because you're all so easy on the eyes. I'm willing to cheat on my husband for all of you, and none of you can meet me halfway?"

"Does it count as cheating when your husband encourages it?" Chikaru giggled.

There was another long silence, and then Kaname made a business of getting to her feet, stretching, and getting out of the bath. She then crossed over to where Miyuki was sitting and held out one hand to her. "Come on, let's go. It's just too painful to see you like this."

"Beg pardon?" Miyuki asked, looking up at the naked woman standing above her.

"Come *on*, Miyuki, we're going upstairs."

"We are?" the former Miator president asked, taking Kaname's hand and allowing herself to be helped out of the water. "What's upstairs?"

Kaname shrugged. "You've *obviously* got an itch. I'm the only vaguely single person here. Let's go scratch it."

Miyuki's eyes narrowed in confusion, then went wide. "Oh! Um… right!" She then swept an unsteady gaze over the remaining ladies. "Looks like I'm off, then. See you all in the morning. If you *do* change your minds and decide on the orgy, though, don't leave me out of it, okay?"

"Oh, come *on*," Kaname sighed, pulling Miyuki toward the house as five pairs of eyes watched with a mix of confusion and shock.

"So tell me, Kaname-chan," Miyuki said, her voice growing more distant as they departed. "Is this going to be pity sex?"

"Miyuki, this is going to be *the very definition* of pity sex."

"Oh, wonderful! I don't think I've ever had *that* before."

The sliding door of the house closed with a thunk, leaving the other five in relative silence.

"Do you think we should intervene?" Tamao asked at last.

Shizuma shook her head. "No. Even this tipsy, Miyuki knows what she's doing. Unless… do you think Lilith will get jealous?"

"She and Kaname have 'an understanding,'" Hazuki snorted, making air-quotes with her fingers. "I wouldn't worry."

"If anything, I think we should be more concerned for Kaname," Chikaru smirked. "She has no idea what's about to hit her."

The conversation lapsed, and Shizuma noticed a new tension in the air hovering between the committed couple and the equally committed trio. Suddenly eyes were not meeting eyes, and arms were moving as though subconsciously to provide modesty and cover.

Shizuma let out a loud sigh, and since there was nothing else for it, she rose and hoisted herself to sit on the rim of the onsen, so that only her feet and ankles were in the water. "Come on, let's not let the

evening get awkward," she smiled down at the others. "We've seen each other naked literally hundreds of times. There's no reason tonight should be different."

"In truth, Shizuma?" Chikaru said, raising her eyebrows, "I don't think anyone could live with you for longer than forty-eight hours without seeing your breasts at least seven times. You *are* a bit of an exhibitionist. You know that, right?"

"Surely you're exaggerating."

"Shizuma, darling, two years ago you asked me to paint a nude portrait of you, and then you framed it and hung it in the upstairs hallway until Nagisa-chan begged you to take it down. You're a showoff."

"And look who's talking," Hazuki sighed, but she had a somewhat evil smile. "Neither of you is the epitome of feminine modesty. I guess if you've got it, flaunt it, right?"

"Oh, hush, you're all gorgeous," Shizuma frowned. "Come on, now, this has *never* been an issue for us."

"Well… we never *made* it an issue, anyway," Tamao said, still blushing.

"What do you mean, Tamao-chan?" Nagisa asked her.

"It's… forgive me for saying, but… the two of you are *incredibly* beautiful," Tamao went on, as Chikaru smiled and took her hand. "Add to that the fact that I used to be in… in love with both of you at different times, and… let's just say I sometimes enjoy these baths for more than just the conversation."

As embarrassed as Tamao was in saying this, Shizuma could not help but feel a warmth in her heart at the way Chikaru stroked her hand, even as Hazuki reached around Chikaru to squeeze Tamao's shoulder. This was obviously something they had discussed before.

For her own part, Shizuma did not mind at all if Tamao or either of the others had been… *enjoying* the sight of her, and she could not deny that it had been mutual. As for the exhibitionist part… well, she couldn't really deny that, at least among the people she felt close to. She only hoped that Nagisa would not be discomfited by Tamao's admission.

To Shizuma's surprise, though, Nagisa was the next to speak. "No, I think I know exactly what you mean, Tamao-chan. I love Shizuma more than life, and I want to marry her and be with her always, but… I'm also not blind. Tamao-chan has become so tall and elegant and beautiful, and Chikaru is so womanly and graceful, and Hazuki-chan is so strong but still gives such soft hugs, and…" She paused to gather herself. "It's confusing sometimes. We're not… lovers, but it doesn't feel right to say that we're just friends, either."

"Two solid years of near-daily skinship will do that," Chikaru smiled indulgently.

"Yes, but… what does this mean for us?" Nagisa went on. "What will happen to us when…"

She could not finish the thought, so Hazuki did it for her. "You're wondering when this will end, aren't you?"

"Yes," Nagisa sighed, looking down into the steaming water. "I know it has to, but… I don't want it to."

"Oh, Nagisa-chan," Tamao whispered, closing the distance between them and hugging Nagisa without a trace of her earlier unease. Shizuma smiled at this: wanting to comfort Nagisa in a time of need was a trait that would never leave Tamao.

And, she had to admit, the two of them embracing naked right in front of her was, to use Miyuki's phrase, easy on the eyes.

Enough of that, though.

"You know," Shizuma ventured, laying one hand on Nagisa's shoulder as she did, "the very first time we shared a bath like this, I remember having these idle, semi-tipsy thoughts that I should just marry all of you. Not for sex, but… just so that I could keep you all."

"I'm disappointed. Not even a little bit for sex?" Chikaru grinned, but Shizuma saw her shoot a wink at Nagisa to show that she was kidding.

"I'll have you know I've been restraint itself," Shizuma said in a haughty tone. "Honestly, other than the occasional incidental contact, I haven't been past first base with *any* of you three."

Hazuki face-palmed. "Oi, are we *really* going to start using the baseball euphemisms for sex?"

"Um, what are we talking about?" Nagisa asked, her brow furrowed with confusion.

"Using baseball as a metaphor for intimacy," Chikaru explained patiently, "where a 'home run' stands for having sex."

Nagisa blinked. "Oh. So then what's first base?"

"A kiss," Chikaru winked. "And then second base, I believe, is touching the breasts?"

"With *intent*," Shizuma clarified. "Hugs don't count, otherwise we'd be hitting doubles all over the park."

"I'm a big fan of doubles," Hazuki offered.

"And then third base?" Tamao asked.

Shizuma cleared her throat. "That would be… shall we say, contact with the genitals, either by hand or mouth, but without it being… well, sex."

"Which is ridiculous," Hazuki frowned. "We're lesbians. How do we have that kind of contact without it being sex? 'Oh, here, let me fondly caress your lady bits, but in a friendly, non-sexual way.'"

"Obviously, this metaphor was invented by men, who have… forgive me, a *deeper* goal," Chikaru winked. "But there's nothing wrong with triples. Besides, I've become quite fond of the number three over these years together." She pulled Tamao and Hazuki in close to either side for a hug.

"But there, you see?" Shizuma went on. "My intentions are pure as the driven snow. I'm perfectly capable of sharing a bath with all of you without making it overtly sexual." She then rolled her eyes in an exaggerated manner. "I've even managed to restrain myself in spite of the fact that I'd have the whole *set* of you if it weren't for *someone* who left me hanging on the kiss I asked for *six years ago* ."

"Poor Shizuma," Chikaru giggled. "Do you still regret that? Maybe Miyuki was right about our baggage after all."

"I just wanted to point out that I've never kissed Shizuma either," Hazuki added, raising one hand slightly.

"No offense, my darling, but you don't count," Chikaru smiled. "You didn't actually go to high school with her."

"Duly noted," Hazuki nodded.

"Hmm," Shizuma pondered. "If we go by indirect kisses, then I daresay everyone here has kissed everyone else, including Miyuki, but… hmm, not Kaname, I don't think? Unless she and Miyuki are bothering with foreplay right now?"

Both Tamao and Chikaru looked at Hazuki, who frowned uncomfortably. "No, we've got her covered as well."

Shizuma was about to ask when *that* had come about, but then she remembered having heard that Hazuki's first kiss had been Naoko,

who herself had once been famously kissed by Kaname at the morning meal in Strawberry Hall. "Right," she nodded, not wanting to take the thought further than this. "See, then? We're all covered. No baggage necessary, and we can stay in our happy couple and trio and *not feel at all guilty* about admiring one another's assets and harmlessly flirting, right?"

"Things really have changed, haven't they?" Tamao said suddenly.

"What do you mean, Tamao-chan?" Nagisa asked again.

Tamao took a steadying breath. "Meaning no disrespect, Shizuma, but before that first bookstore trip you and I had together, I was terrified that you were going to hide Nagisa-chan away, and that not only would I lose her as a crush, but I'd even lose her as a friend."

"Oh, Tamao-chan," Nagisa whispered. "Don't you remember when I said how important you are to me, and how I wanted you to always be a part of my life?"

"I'm sorry, Nagisa-chan, but doubt can be a relentless thing," Tamao smiled a little sadly. "But then it turned out I was wrong. Not only did I fall in love for myself, but you stayed, and… and *you let her* ." She said this last part looking up into Shizuma's eyes. "Not only that, but you and I became closer than I ever could have imagined, and… *now* look at us! To be here with the four of you tonight is a miracle, really. You were right, Nagisa-chan. The two of you aren't my lovers, and I don't need you to be, truly, but… I can't find it in my heart to just call you friends, either."

"Tamao-chan is very sweet," Shizuma smiled at her.

"Thank you," Tamao smiled briefly in return, but her face quickly grew serious again. "But you're in your fourth year, Shizuma. How much longer do we have like this?"

"I have plenty of graduate work to do," Shizuma reminded her.

"Yes, but… eventually that will end as well, and… I just wish we could stay in this house forever."

"So do I," Nagisa whispered.

"I know the feeling," Hazuki said softly. "Impossible teenage dreams aside, I have everything I ever wanted here. I don't want this to end either."

And so it was back to this. Shizuma knew, from previous talks, that this thought weighed on Nagisa. They were not children anymore: even in the eyes of the law they were all adults now, and had been since Nagisa's twentieth birthday. Even as Strawberry Hall was a thing of their collective past, sharing this house was very much in the realm of being a college student. What would become of them once they no longer had their common schooling to keep them together?

She thought back on the many pleasant memories of this shared time, and of the incredible levels of trust that had developed between them all. While she had endless happy (not to mention steamy) images of Nagisa, and while her beloved fiancée was still the center of her life and love, the truth was that this paradise had not been theirs alone. She remembered the times when Tamao had fallen asleep beside her on the couch, her head pillowed against Shizuma's chest. She remembered brushing and braiding Chikaru's hair and crying together with her during that year before the other three had arrived. She remembered both the training and the simply exquisite massages Hazuki had given to her and all the others at one time or another. She remembered four separate sets of hands washing her back in the bath, and how each of them had their own unique feel.

That was the moment that something clicked within her, and Shizuma felt a smile gracing her lips. It was simple, really, if she thought about it, and she wondered why this had never occurred to her before as anything more than a joke.

"Well, then," she said, slipping back into the water, but remaining on her feet to address them all. "I suppose there's no other choice. I'll just have to marry all of you after all."

"I don't think that's legal, my dear," Chikaru smirked, but there was a softness to her features.

"Obviously not," Shizuma sighed, "since I can't even legally marry Nagisa yet. It's going to be tougher for the three of you, of course. Even if this country finally decides to let same-sex couples marry, I think we're a long way from polygamy."

"We'll just have to keep living in sin, then," Hazuki sighed. "Woe is us."

"What I'm trying to say," Shizuma continued, "is that until then, it's the *commitment* that matters. Nagisa and I have made our commitment…" she paused to look at the ring on her finger, then smiled down at Nagisa, who gave her a brilliant (if slightly confused) smile, "… and the three of you have made yours. Nagisa and I won't let the real world tear us apart, and I'm sure the same goes for you. You'll find a way to stay together, you'll compromise, and you'll support one another's dreams wherever you end up. Am I correct?"

"Of course we will," Tamao nodded.

Shizuma tried to speak again, but to her surprise she felt a slight clench in her throat, and there was something more than condensation from the steam in her eyes. "I feel the same way as all of you. Living with you has been a dream, and honestly, it's been a dream I didn't think I deserved. I don't want this to end either. I want all of you to stay with me always. I want us to be able to still have baths together when we're all old and saggy. I want us to give Miyuki a safe place to come and complain about her single life as a married woman, and I even want to make sure Kaname has a place to stay between… whatever these long trips are that she and Lilith keep taking."

"Shizuma…" Chikaru whispered.

"All that being said," Shizuma sighed, trying to clear the catch from her voice, "we're already having to go against the norm, just by being what we are and loving who we love. Like Tamao-chan said, we've had our share of miracles just to get to where we are tonight. So why stop now? Since we're already doing the impossible, why not keep going? Why not make *another* commitment? Who's to say we can't keep letting our two little families be one big family, and find a way to make sure that our *home*… wherever it may be… is always with one another?"

All the others were watching her attentively now, though Tamao, Chikaru and Hazuki would occasionally exchange glances, no doubt communicating in that wordless way of theirs. Nagisa was giving her an amazed smile, and it was from here that Shizuma took the courage to finally drive the point home. "I think I speak for Nagisa when I say this, but… Chikaru, Tamao, Hazuki… we love you very much, and…"

At the last moment, she stumbled, just as she had with Nagisa. "Will you marry us?" she asked, grinning at the memory. "Will you stay with us always?"

" *Ara*…" Hazuki whispered.

"Shizuma," Tamao gasped, looking from her to Nagisa.

"Not to share a name, not even to share a bed," Shizuma went on. "Just to share a life, and a home."

"And to think," said Chikaru in a quiet, amazed voice, "there was a time I was worried you'd never be able to let someone into your heart again."

"I have all of you to thank for that," Shizuma whispered, looking down at Nagisa and gripping her hand tightly. "Especially you, my love."

"You know very well that it won't be easy, though," Chikaru reminded her. "We each have different personal goals, and while some of them are very complementary, yours and mine in particular may prove difficult to attain together."

"I know that," Shizuma nodded, feeling some of the adrenaline leaving her. "Believe me, I know."

"As long as we're aware of that," Chikaru smiled. "But you know something? You're quite right. We *do* have a habit of living against the odds, don't we?" She exchanged smiles, nods, and probably more silent communication with her two loves, then she stood up as well, before turning the gesture into a deep bow. "Shizuma, Nagisa… our answer is yes. Let's try, then, shall we?"

Nagisa and Tamao gave a simultaneous squeal of happiness, then immediately rushed to one another for a hug, and Hazuki simply smiled and did the tiniest fist-pump just above the surface of the water.

For a long while, Shizuma was too dazed to speak, even as Chikaru rose from her bow and smiled at her. Then, finally, her own smile broke free again. "Do you really think we can?"

"Well… I once said that there are *some* things which must remain a dream," Chikaru winked, "but I gave up long ago on the idea of anything being truly impossible."

With those words, Shizuma again remembered a kiss that never was. "True," she said with an exaggerated pout, falling back into the safety of humorous flirting. "And look at it this way: now you can leave me hanging for even longer!"

Chikaru laughed and rolled her eyes. "Oh, for heaven's sake," she sighed, and then before Shizuma could do so much as flinch, she crossed the distance between them, took Shizuma's face in both hands, and kissed her full on the lips.

It was not a tiny peck, nor was it a passionate duel, but it was very soft, very real, and very, *very* pleasant.

"I hope it was worth the wait," Chikaru giggled after they broke, and then she wrapped her arms around Shizuma and held her tightly, even as Shizuma, still slightly dazed, did the same.

In the distance, she heard Hazuki speaking in a long-suffering voice. "Well, damn. Now I *really* feel left out."

"Um… Tamao-chan?"

"Sorry, Nagisa-chan. Can't talk. Burning this scene into my memory."

"You and me both."

"Well, I don't know about the two of you," Hazuki added, "but I'm getting in on this." She then stood and embraced Shizuma and Chikaru from the side, wrapping warm, strong arms around them.

"You and me both!" Nagisa said again, and a moment later Shizuma felt arms around her waist, and that familiar, perfect shape pressing against her back.

"I will *not* be left out of this," Tamao finished, coming up opposite Hazuki and hugging as far around them as she could reach.

Shizuma could not speak. Once again, Chikaru had beaten her at her own game, but she couldn't find it in herself to care. Even though she could tell that the kiss had been a one-time event (and in all truth, she knew that it was best that way), it would be a memory she treasured, because it heralded the beginning of something wonderful for them all.

The naked hugs didn't hurt, of course.

"Definitely worth the wait," she whispered. "Thank you, Chikaru. Thank you all."

There was the sudden sound of a window being opened, and then a voice came ringing down from above. " *Damn it, I told you all! No orgy without me!"*

The End

"At Exactly What Point Did I Lose Control Of This Flirting?"

by Rain Fletcher (Suzume CA)

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I considered holding this story open for the inevitable Shizuma/Nagisa wedding (perhaps with the chapter title "Get Me To The Church On Time?" or "Can Someone Tell These Protestors To Go Away?"), but on the whole, I think this flash-forward is a better place to end it. I'm sure the wedding will find its way into one of the stories at some point.

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"At Exactly What Point Did I Lose Control Of This Flirting?" has been a Studio Nine Sparrows production. (Come see us on Facebook! We have meta!)